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Sustaining educational futures for multi-campus TAFE environments: Change requirements for leadership roles and practices

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Abstract

Leadership in an educational setting can impact on the functioning of an organisation. Over the past 20 years, the nature of leading and managing TAFE institutes has changed significantly. However, if leaders have impediments that hamper their ability to perform their roles then the level of performance exhibited across an organisation could be low resulting in sub-standard practices. To achieve TAFE goals necessitates a strong understanding of leadership in TAFE settings and re-thinking leadership approaches used to facilitate teaching and learning. In the TAFE setting, initiatives such as flat management structures have resulted in changes for leaders who now struggle to fulfil their roles. The aim of this current paper is to focus on analysing leaders' challenges within TAFE institutes in relation to multi-campus settings. Many leaders in TAFE institutes may be inadequately prepared for effectively leading multi-campus environments. Johansson (2004) argues that a new approach to educational leadership views the leader as a key resource for building and maintaining teams of educational professionals as well as for achieving change and reform in an effective and efficient way. Transformational leadership can lead to employee motivation and commitment required for positive organisational change. Although there is a range of leadership theories, however, transformational leadership and especially distributed leadership provide a context for today's changing needs and may be applicable to TAFE's current situation. Sustaining educational futures for TAFE institutions will require research that investigates leadership roles and practices, particularly the potential of distributed leadership, to understand how to effectively manage TAFE's current multi-campus environments.

TAFE institutes in Queensland have undergone significant changes over the last 20 years with major changes occurring in the early 1990's and progressive incremental changes ever since (Queensland Government, 2005). Change in TAFE institutions is being influenced by government reform and social, economic and technological change. In the TAFE institute setting, initiatives such as flat management structures have resulted in significant changes for leaders who now struggle to complete all they need to accomplish in their roles (Rice, 2001). Extra work manifests itself in increased time at meetings, heavy communication demand through emails and processes involving teacher teams and educational development. The standard hierarchical TAFE setting consists of teachers reporting to an Operations Manager who reports to a Faculty Director who reports to a Director of Education and Training, reporting to the Institute Director at the top of the Institute hierarchy. Although there are signs of a traditional hierarchy with a clear chain of command there are also areas that break with tradition. Most noticeable is the amount of reports answering to the managers.

TAFE institutes are large complex organisations requiring a multitude of attributes in order for them to operate in a professionally effective and efficient way. Multi-campus TAFEs

emanate from the Queensland Government Skilling Solutions Paper which has seen the amalgamation of more TAFE institutes in Queensland (Department of Education, Training and the Arts, [DETA], 2006). A relatively wide geographic area is a characteristic of multicampus TAFEs (e.g., from south of the Brisbane River to Caboolture). One institute may comprise of 6 campuses, over 700 staff and about 20,000 students (e.g., see DETA, 2006, p. 2). TAFE is at a crucial turning point for re-investing in its leadership to manage such multi-campus situations. Rice (2001) notes that in this context, TAFE institute leaders feel there is a real thirst for survival with constant funding cuts and the challenge of managing workplace relationships in which they find conflict with teachers is an ongoing feature of the landscape. In this setting there is strong evidence (Rice, 2001) of a double-sided dynamic operating whereby management are consumed by administrative processes while teachers generally are averse to such processes and build boundaries around core teaching and learning. Administrative processes are a primary focus of management and with increasing compliance across all areas, the administration is large and problematic.

For their part, teachers may have a healthy suspicion of management motives and question change in all its forms. Teachers in the early 1990's were delivered significant autonomy and whilst this was originally treated with suspicion and distrust, it has evolved to be a significant part of the teacher ethos in Institute life (Falk & Smith, 2003). Few educational managers ever venture into teachers' classrooms and when they do it is usually for ad hoc administrative reasons. Intrusion along the lines of investigating and improving classroom practice are extremely rare. Thus a pattern of behaviour evolves where a divide exists between teacher work and manager work and the key focus of TAFE work (Chappell, 2001; Falk & Smith, 2003).

Some efforts have been made to encourage teachers to undertake stronger roles in the overall leadership of their respective areas. Despite these efforts, institute dynamics indicate that teachers are in almost continual conflict with management over a myriad of issues such as job responsibility, audit compliance, promotional responsibility, and student interviewing (Mulcahy, 2003). Duties that are not traditional teaching duties appear likely to raise dispute. The nature of teaching is constantly changing and TAFE institute operational requirements deliver challenges that stretch the capacity of the organisation on a daily basis (Callan, 2001). New approaches to leadership may assist in delivering better outcomes to ensure the Institute operates on a higher level of operational effectiveness.

Managers who take up leadership roles at a TAFE institute are guided by the manner in which they have operated in other settings or have been exposed to examples of leadership in these circumstances (Johansson, 2004). This, and the generally accepted notion of leaders lead and followers follow, impedes fully embracing innovative leadership approaches that may engage staff in this setting and encourage new ideas. Examples of innovative leadership practice are uncommon (Palmieri, 2003) and operations inherently are characterised by conflict between teachers and managers across the teaching teams. Many leaders in TAFE institutes appear to be inadequately prepared for effectively leading such a diverse and complex system as is presented in a multi-campus work environment encompassing differing industrial award conditions and work cultures (Callan, 2001). In addition, leaders may not change leadership practice even after in-service initiatives, hence, new approaches to leadership are required (Mulcahy, 2003). In this setting, reform is required to develop a work culture that is less confrontational and more united in a common purpose. However, there is a need to understand both management and leadership in order to distinguish leadership roles and practices.

Whilst management and leadership can be seen as distinct categories of action, Lumby (2001) argues that managers should synthesise these two dimensions rather than consider them as separate skills. In this regard, Bush (2003) contends that management is concerned with the purpose and aim of education and thus can focus on the achievement of objectives relevant to these purposes and aims while leadership refers to the ability to influence others to undertake certain activities (Yolk, 2002). In considering the notions of management and leadership, Bush and Middlewood (2005) claim that management and leadership need to be given equal prominence if an educational setting is to be effective in terms of meeting its objectives and in adopting an innovative vision that inspires the school to new levels of practice. Maintenance of processes and procedures through effective management is essential if the organisation is to maintain stability and quality service to clients through times of change. Equally, visionary leadership that promotes change and innovation is necessary if the organisation is to keep pace with changes in the external environment (e.g., Hudson, Craig, & Hudson, 2007). To illustrate, Brisbane North Institute of TAFE with the nationally prescribed Business Services Training Package has the challenge of compliance with delivery of this nationally accredited curriculum with the need to innovate to respond to regional differences and shifts in the market. So while management practices are important in determining compliance with set objectives, leadership practices can inspire innovation and change in line with a defined vision. Briggs (2003) notes that visionary leadership may be difficult to act out in a public sector environment that is primarily focused on the need to comply to set regulatory standards. It is therefore worth exploring the concept of what skills modern leaders need, and the literature surrounding identification of contemporary leadership development in a TAFE institute environment.

Wasserberg (2000) believes people who become staff are central to any leadership influence and that the principal goal for a leader is to unite staff behind a common cause. In the Institute setting, the leaders of the Institute have the opportunity to influence teachers and other staff directly. Brisbane North Institute of TAFE works within the framework of TAFE Queensland and DETA, and each institute is in a position to be able to respond to local events and issues with great speed and with the capacity for discretion. In larger centralised bureaucracies these options are far more challenging. Within this process leaders are able to gain a vision from the external environment of the Institute and then communicate this vision directly to the staff concerned due to the semi-autonomous nature of TAFE institutes. This of course is a communicative process and, as Bush and Middlewood (2005) note, staff are more likely to embrace a vision if they have been involved in its creation and process. Leadership practices that can best facilitate change in these institutes need to be investigated (Falk & Smith, 2003; Mulcahy, 2005). In TAFE institutes, leadership is enabled across many staff areas and, as Falk and Smith (2003) acknowledge, there is a need for greater understanding of the role of leadership in this rapidly changing environment.

There are different forms of leadership that have been studied over time. For example, trait leadership (Yolk, 2002) refers to distinguishable characteristics an individual who is deemed to be a leader has as compared to non-leaders. Traits may include physical appearance, intelligence, skills and knowledge, and temperament. Another leadership form involves analysing leadership behaviours where it is deemed that if a leader carries out relevant duties and functions properly then the organisation will prosper (Falk & Smith, 2003). Central to this area of leader study is identification of behaviours that the leader undertakes to accomplish work objectives. Focus is placed on the concept of leadership styles as an identifiable set of behaviours which leaders can exhibit. Faulk and Smith (2001) criticise the

notion of the single heroic leader and suggest instead that a culture of leadership needs to pervade the institution from its apex to each division and team. However, Schermerhorn (2005) categorises four of the most used leadership styles as directive/autocratic, participative/democratic, abdicative/laissez-faire and supportive/human relations leaders. However, this focus is on leader behaviour and not on leadership as a social and organisational intervention spread over a number of worker actions or the impact of work-site contextual factors. Schermerhorn also notes that successful leaders adjust their behaviour in relation to the readiness of followers to perform in a given situation. The leader might deal with circumstances and problems and this type of leadership is seen as situational and relational.

Johansson (2004) argues that a new approach to educational leadership views the leader as a key resource for building and maintaining teams of educational professionals as well as for achieving change and reform in an effective and efficient way. Geijsel, Slegers, Leithwood, and Jantzi (2003) note that transformational leadership leads to employee motivation and commitment leading to the kind of extra effort required for significant organisational change. TAFE institutes are large organisations with their own recruitment, selection and human resource strategies, planning approaches to maximize incomes and management of very large budgets with complicated income streams (Gregory, 1996). Moreover, Davis (2004) points to the long period of time when TAFE institutes enjoyed being a government monopoly divorced from the rigours of competition and how in recent times TAFE institutes have evolved into competitive businesses. Despite these important duties in the face of training reform, there has been little study into how TAFE managers are adjusting in this era of change (Rice, 2001).

Within a range of leadership theories, transformational leadership provides a context for today's changing needs. Transformational leadership is characterised by four behaviours, namely charisma, inspiration, intellectual stimulation and individual consideration (Beugre, Acar, & Braun, 2006; Humphreys & Einstein, 2003). Kelloway, Barling, Kelly, Comtois, and Gatlen (2003) note that through these four aspects, transformational leaders increase employee confidence and persuade employees to have regard for the interests of the group. Four main characteristics are involved starting with idealised performance. In terms of significant outcomes from this leadership approach, Odom and Green (2003) claim that because of the emphasis on the moral development of the follower, transformational leadership seems to lead toward more ethical decision making. Importantly, in multi-campus TAFE environments is the need to distribute leadership in order to effectively manage each individual institution. Distributed leadership is linked to and emerges through transformational leadership.

Distributing leadership as a way to manage multi-campus

Distributed leadership as a concept can be defined in many ways depending on its application. It can apply to leadership from a remote (physical) location, using only technological means of communication such as e-mail and video-conference (Kayworth & Leidner, 2000). Most conceptions of distributed leadership, however, tend to be much broader as distributed leadership is not only about the traits of leaders. Distributed leadership focuses on collective leader accomplishments rather than individual leader personal characteristics. Moreover, with the complexity of modern TAFE, Galbraith (2004) argues that traditional organisational arrangements with official leaders set at designated intervals is an outdated model and much more emphasis should be placed on the power of individual informal leaders who are spread across any organisation. Distributed leadership evinces that effective leadership emanates

from collective spirits as workers support the efforts of others as they exert their contribution into the broader system (Hopkins & Levinn, 2000).

Distributed leadership is associated with what can be achieved across networks of individuals. Gronn (2002) emphasises the benefits of utilising the strengths of people in such a way that they pool their initiative and expertise, the outcome is a product or energy which is greater than the sum of their individual actions. Galbraith (2004) derives the worth of the effective leader where emphasis is placed on the abilities of the leader to make a difference through their own actions as distinct from the notion of learning organisation theory such as shared vision, mental models, and team learning, and the leverage potential that resides in them. Distributed leadership is about leadership pervading across all aspects of the organisation and, indeed, to wider community members including students, employers and members of the public. Distributed leadership is characterised by its emphasis on the issue of groups and networks to support action and, in this respect, there are overlaps with other notions of leadership such as collegiality, democratic engagement, and the like.

In any organisation there is the potential for the social and cultural context to act in a positive way to create and sustain the conditions for distributed leadership to prosper (Knight & Trowler, 1999; Bryant, 2003). The nature of a new, invigorated organisational culture, where a more distributed leadership style is being encouraged, is also significant. For example, values such as commitment to transparent procedures (Ayas & Zenuik, 2001) and belief in people (Abzug & Phelps, 1998) are highly important components of a culture that encourages distributed leadership. Ironically, more distributive approaches may come from directives from outside or from the head of the organisation (Bickmore, 2001). In this way the impetus towards a distributed leadership style can come from a directive leader in the first instance (Blase & Blase 2000; Gold, Evans, Earley, & Collarbone, 2002). Leadership that drives change to a more distributed organisational ethos can work in conjunction with a broader policy drive (Bickmore, 2001). As distributed leadership principles are introduced it may create an alignment between formal and informal leaders in the organisation (Silva, Gimbert, & Nolan, 2000). Team dynamics with an emphasis on collaboration and the need for the sharing of common goals has strong association with the distributed model of leadership (Karkkainen, 2000). Graetz (2000) argues that such groups of individuals can operate in a distributed manner in conjunction with a strong personalised leadership at the top of the organisation. In this regard, momentum is offered by distributed leadership to support calls for collaborative working patterns across organisational structures (Hartley & Allison, 2000), and this must include TAFE multi-campus organisations. Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond (2001) further emphasise the point that whilst tasks are a key element of leadership analysis, they are not sufficient on their own as leaders act in a particular situation, and that it unfolds on the basis of the perception of individual practitioners. TAFE people, the history, the events, and the physical settings are all part of the situation wherein leadership can be exercised. Yet, distributed leadership as with other leadership models is not without its issues and concerns.

Concerns with distributed leadership

Distributed leadership has a strong emphasis on autonomy and it needs to be noted that TAFE as an organisation has fairly prescriptive goals and objectives formulated from central office (Graetz, 2000). TAFE's approach may be at odds with a distributed leadership model that encourages individuals and networks across TAFE institutes to deliver results (Keyes, Hanley-Maxwell, & Capper, 1999). Moreover, distributed leadership can be affected by the organisational structure in the sense of official work teams, however, this structural approach

may not count for much if the ethos of the organisation does not embrace a distributed leadership mindset that empowers and values the input of people across the organisation (Harris & Chapman, 2002; Spillane et al., 2001; Goodman, Baron & Myers, 2001).

Concerns arise as to how much impetus distributed leadership can generate when the wider, external social and cultural context may be more immersed in notions of a directive, hierarchical society (Spillane et al., 2001). In the same way, consideration needs to be given to the influence of internal cultural forces. The cultural history of an organisation is significant and moves towards distributed leadership can be challenging if strong directive leadership at the top of an organisation is to coexist with distributed leadership (Hartley & Allison, 2000). Brytting and Trollestad (2000) and Coad (2000) underline the effect of a sustained culture of non-participation which can result in ambivalence when new participative opportunities are offered. Graetz (2000) takes this further by identifying that distributed leadership approaches can be blocked by middle and lower levels of management if such managers are not supportive of moves to a distributed leadership approach. It is therefore imperative that for distributed leadership to be successful it must be embraced by the organisation at all levels.

At the teaching team level in TAFE institutes there are many semi-official and official teams with a presence of informal leaders who provide impetus for the teaching staff. Leadership in this environment tends to emerge from individuals who demonstrate initiative rather than from a formal structured approach (Mulcahy, 2003). Regardless of the arrangements that emerge within a particular faculty, teaching staff are officially answerable to the designated Operation Managers and Faculty Director. Organisational groups are variable in their approach to their work and leadership can emerge in unpredictable ways. This phenomenon is referred to by Evers and Lakomski (2001, p. 500) as “decentralised and dispersed” leadership where traditional hierarchies and formal leaders are less influential in terms of their impact on teacher practice than they have been in the past. Nevertheless, distributed leadership seems to have potential within multi-campus TAFE institutes, particularly when other leadership models appear limited in addressing current issues in these circumstances.

Arrangements whereby staff emerge as leaders without a formal title or position, yet are part of a formal faculty structure, represent a phenomenon, which has had little research undertaken. Johansson (2004) notes that all leadership is about constant learning, particularly for educational leaders because they are leaders of educated people who engage in intellectual work. In commenting on these areas of leadership and the connection between informal networks and the official hierarchy, Evers and Lakomski (2001, p. 500) refer to “the inner thoughts of people” as a means of determining the strength and the direction of leadership in the teacher network. This dimension of leadership that involves the inner thoughts of people is complex and reflects the great diversity of influence that teachers have on the way that ideas and innovations are brought into being, and conversely hindered from developing depending on the particular collection of thoughts that emerge as dominant in a teacher environment. These “inner thoughts” leading to new pathways and guarding of old practices are played out under the observance of the official hierarchy and the leadership themes require research with respect to implications for distributed leadership.

Restructuring has been a major factor in influencing leadership dynamics in the TAFE system. As Mulcahy (2003) points out “in both the United Kingdom and Australia, financial and competitive issues have sharply focused decision-making, led to less open management, and estranged many senior managers from their colleagues” (p. 20). Mulcahy claims that

restructuring has resulted in many changes including the “lean organisation” which is a major contributor to the multi-campus leadership model, now in place at BNIT. This model includes the concept of “self-managed teams” (Mulcahy, 2003, p. 76) and appears as a prospect for employing a distributed leadership model.

Conclusion

TAFE is an organisation that enlists personnel who have already had successful careers elsewhere. With this pool of talented people, the manager’s job is to gain maximum output using the talent available. TAFE cannot afford to embrace the approach that Briggs (2003) observes in the broader community in that good ideas already exist in most organisations but few have a process to find, create, nurture and execute these ideas. Effective leadership could be a catalyst for unleashing a plethora of lost ideas, missed opportunities and an abundance of frustration and unsolved problems in the workplace. In the TAFE system, most teachers join after successful careers in industry only to find that they join a system heavily laden with bureaucratic procedures and leadership can be often controlling or lacks the capacity to realise the potential of a talented workforce. Calabrese (2002) argues that “strong authoritarian leaders may get results, yet their results seldom last. When they leave the organisation, their changes often leave with them” (p. 326). Further, Lewis (2000) notes that organisations that are poor at internal cooperation also lack the skills needed for teamwork on the outside which leads to failed alliances and hence forsaken business potential. Nevertheless, those organisations that are successful create a bundle of employee practices that are customer focused, aligned with each other, and reinforce the organisation’s strategic position (Callan, 2001).

Organisations and leaders need to harness the collective talents of staff (Bush & Middlewood, 2005). The main problem is concerned with enhancing leadership practices across a multi-campus TAFE institute to best utilise the collective talents of the management and teaching staff. Callan (2001) notes the considerable challenges facing leaders in the TAFE institute environment where new and fresh ideas are met with a culture of disengagement and resistance based on “old values” that are misaligned with new directions being envisaged through new departmental strategic directions. In TAFE’s multi-campus environment the standard hierarchical setting consists multi level reporting. Moreover, communication is challenged because a leader can be physically located at one campus with direct reports several kilometres away on far distant campuses (DETA, 2006). Further research is needed to examine leadership practices in a TAFE institute environment (Mulcahy, 2003; Falk & Smith, 2003). Hence, identifying leadership practices across multi-campus environments may provide a way to understand effective practices. Indeed, there appears to be no or little literature focused specifically on the role of a TAFE educational leader in a multi-campus environment. Studies on how TAFE leaders operate in this complex environment are needed to gain a better understanding of the issues and circumstances that surround these roles. There needs to be research on what leadership roles currently exist in a multi-campus TAFE.

The focus for a research study needs to identify and understand leadership roles and practices across a multi-campus TAFE environment, and in particular the management team of Faculty Director, Operations Managers and the Teaching Teams. Distributed leadership appears as an appropriate model for investigating its potential within multi-campus TAFEs. There is a need for changing and improving existing leadership practices within TAFE settings, particularly as TAFE leadership now encompasses multi-campus settings. In the conditions now presented within TAFE’s multi-campus, distributed leadership may be able to assist hierarchical leaders in ensuring successful management. Sustaining educational futures for

TAFE institutions will require studies that investigate leadership roles and practices, which includes distributed leadership, to understand how to effectively manage TAFE's current multi-campus environments.

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